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Empowering the Third Force in Contemporary Nigerian Politics

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EMPOWERING THE THIRD FORCE IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN POLITICS

Remarks on the Occasion of a Traditional Reception for
Wole Soyinka by the Nigerian Community in Boston
at the University of Massachusetts at Boston, July 23, 1995

By

Professor Chukwuma Azuonye
Chair, Black Studies Department
University of Massachusetts at Boston

Distinguished Guest of Honor, Nobel Prizewinner, Wole Soyinka; Ladies and Gentlemen.

News from Nigeria are so bad these days that it has become increasingly difficult to utter the familiar phrases of welcome. The word, *gladness*, doesn't come forth easily. Gladness is no more. Gladness has fled from the hearts and hearths of so many people in our dear, dirty country that one tends to miss a heart beat whenever the name of the country is mentioned these days. It is indeed difficult for me to stand up here and say that I am glad to welcome our distinguished guest of honor to Massachusetts and the City of Boston, for where lies the gladness and why should I or anyone else be glad? We all should be back home in Nigeria now contributing to the urgent task of helping to raise the living standards of our much abused and impoverished compatriots whose quality of life index is reckoned by all the available statistics to be one of the lowest in the world. But, alas, here we are — scattered all over the world, rudely uprooted from our land, straining without gladness to make sense of our dreadful misfortunes.

There is, perhaps, only one sense in which one can boldly utter the word, gladness, on any occasion such as this. It is not just comforting but indeed a great cause for gladness that we can boast among our compatriots men of distinction and integrity like our guest of honor, Wole — men whose achievements are a reassurance we are not all like the hordes of robbers and beggars whose shameless and crude dances in the corridors of power have remained a cause of constant embarrassment to us all. Tonight, we honor Wole, not only as an internationally acclaimed man of letters who, in 1986 won the highest accolade of distinction in his chosen field — the Nobel Prize for Literature — but as a veritable conscience of our country whose leadership of democratic forces in exile here in North America will undoubtedly contribute to the empowerment of the much-needed third force which, in the fullness of time, will — we sincerely hope — override the decrees, edicts and ordinances of the incumbent military hordes in power (whom I call the first force) and their allies (whom I call the second force) comprising a corrupt business class of men and women who, in spite of their stinking opulence, have never earned an honest day's wage.

My generation — described by Wole himself as “the wasted generation” have always drawn inspiration and hope from Wole Soyinka’s forty odd years of distinction as a playwright, poet, novelist, essayist, social critic, political activist, and literary scholar. Although his contributions to literature are varied, Wole is best known internationally for his politically provocative plays, which are invariably social commentaries on the day-to-day problems of Nigeria and the wider African world. In an interview, some years ago, with Henry Louis Gates, jr., with whom he revived *Transition* readership, Wole is reported by *The New York Review of Books* as saying: “I cannot conceive of my existence without political involvement.”

Wole’s political involvement resulted in his imprisonment during the Nigerian civil war of 1967-70. Accused of treason, he was held in solitary confinement during most of this period. Two of his works, *The Man Died: Prison Notes of Wole Soyinka* (1968) and *Poems from Prison* (1969), were written on toilet paper and smuggled out of prison, a feat to be repeated with equal aplomb by radical Kenyan writer, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, in the composition in prison of his novel, *The Devil on the Cross*, a devastating tirade against the phenomenon of governance as organized robbery in a post-independence African state much like Kenya and Nigeria.

Wole’s pioneering efforts and creative talents have been a major influence on the development of Nigerian drama. In the 1960’s, he founded two Nigerian theater groups — The 1960 Masks and The Orisun Theater. With The 1960 Masks, he produced his play ostensibly celebrating Nigerian independence, *A Dance of the Forest* which turned out to be more a soul-searching enquiry into the meaning of our past than a romantic celebration. About the same time, Wole expressed his doubt about the value of such romantic African cultural movements like the Negritude movement among African writers of the French expression in his now famous dictum, “the Tiger does not proclaim its own tigritude.” Since these radical beginnings, Wole’s plays have been widely performed in university and public theaters in Nigeria, in other African countries and in Europe and the United States. Some of the most widely staged of his plays have been his adaption of *The Bacchae of Euripides* (1973), his parody of African dictators, *A Play for Giants* (1984), and his topical and symbolic recreation of political intrigues in a Yoruba kingdom, *Death and the King’s Horsemen* (1976), whose uncanny reflections on contemporary African politics have been much discussed by many a perceptive critic. Wole himself played the lead role in the Calpenny film version of his first major political play, *Kongi’s Harvest*, a satiric and comic depiction of megalomania in a post-independence African state that was once exclusively seen as closely resembling Nkrumah’s Ghana but which today can fit into the confused situations in many other African states.

To date, Wole has published two stylistically challenging novels, *The Interpreters* (1965), winner of the 1968 Jock Campbell Literary Award, and *Season of Anomy* (1973). The former, comparable to Ayi Kwei Armah’s *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* in its bitter tone of disillusionment and use of scatological imagery as a vehicle of satire, is about a group of Nigerian intellectuals frustrated by their society, and the latter is an allegory on the Nigerian civil war in which the issues at stake are invested with wider universal significance.

More stylistically challenging, but much more easily accessible to the ordinary reader, is Wole's poetry which is deeply rooted in his native Yoruba mythology. While most of his poems (*Idanre and Other Poems*), are symbolic reflections of universal questions about human and transhuman existence, others, like those collected in *A Shuttle in the Crypt* (1972) and *Mandela's Earth and Other Poems* (1988) deal with more pressing issues in Nigerian and pan-African politics in much the same vein as his plays.

When his autobiography, *Aké: The Years of Childhood*, was published in 1982, it was hailed by *The New York Times* as one of the twelve best books of that year. A charming memoir of Wole's first eleven years of life, the book offers insights into Yoruba culture and its influence on his childhood. It is indeed an evocation of a paradise denied successive generation of younger Nigeria by these several years of military holocaust.

Born in Abeokuta (City built under the rock) in Nigeria's state of Ogun, Wole was educated at the University of Ibadan (then a branch of the University of London) and at the University of Leeds in England. He has held teaching and research appointments in several universities both at home and abroad, including the University of Ibadan, The University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University), Cornell University, and currently Harvard University. Just before he won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1986, he had retired as a professor of comparative literature at Ile-Ife to devote himself to writing, occasional lecturing and voluntary public service. His last voluntary service was as Chairman of the National Road Safety Commission, from which he was forced to resign because he disagreed with the constant changes of direction of Babangida's military government.

The situation under which Wole was forced to resign is perhaps no different from that which inspired a little jingle which I heard a few years ago from University of Nigeria primary school children:

Nigeria play ball
Nigeria win
Babangida jump up
Ten kobo fall
Rashidi pick am
Go buy groundnut
Babangida come
And give 'im a slap!

I don't know how the song originated, or what it means, and none of the children who sang it, including my daughter from whom I got this version, has been able to explain it to me. All I know is that it says something cynical about the leadership of our country and, — coming as it does from innocent school children — its message of absolute loss of confidence in our leaders seems doubly cynical.

Needless to say, only the most insidious form of child abuse can conduce such cynicism in the minds of children. Not surprisingly, when a group of pupils from the same school were intercepted by a professor as they argued furiously among themselves about what they would do if they were in Babangida's position, the most vocal of them said: Of course, I will take all the money I can grab and run out of the country.

Recent governance in Nigeria has been described as a kleptocracy — a government of the people by robbers for robbers. This is by no means an unfair description. You will get a feel of it as soon as you arrive at any Nigerian port — custom officials and policemen, taxi drivers and hotel cashiers, bank managers and foreign exchange touts — everywhere you go, you are surrounded by robbers and beggars. Is it any surprise, then, that an American journalist was able to obtain a Nigerian citizenship together with a Nigeria passport within one day of arriving in the country, as recently revealed in the NBC program, *Sixty Minutes*. The phrase 419 is today used widely as a popular code for robbery aided and abetted by people in authority. These powerful ones take what they can get, literally at the gunpoint held by the military, while all honest citizenry have been transformed into beggars of sorts. If you have never experienced it, try it and you will see. The robbers will force you to beg. They will hold everything so far away from your reach that, after hours of waiting for what belongs to you in vain, you will be humiliated into the familiar Pidgin vernacular cry: “Oga, I beg ool”

But the problem with governance as armed robbery is that, beg as you might, nothing is ever yielded. The situation is as it has been recaptured for us in an allegorical novel written in Igbo by the late Uchenna Ubesie. Entitled *Ukpaka Okpoko Buuru* (*Grasshopper Carried Away by the Hornbill*), the novel tells the story of a faraway land whose government is seized by robbers. The robbers set up the ideal kleptocracy — a government of the people by robbers for robbers. Turning the laws and customs of the land upside down, they establish daredevil banditry as the highest ideal of state to be rewarded by the title, *Ekwueme* (He who does as he says). In the face of these travesties of morality and all ethical norms, the freeborn elders of the land are swept into exile or else crushed for their inability to measure up to the ideals of statebanditry. One is reminded here of Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s Swiftian satire of the same vein, *The Devil on the Cross*. But the parallels to the situation from which our guest of honor has fled are unmistakable, and Wole himself has woven allusions to them in his recent writings, focusing squarely on them in his long-playing record *I Love my Country*, waxed in the heat of the crisis of 1983 which shore up the present military regime in Nigeria.

Are we glad to welcome Wole to New England?

To welcome Wole is to re-dedicate ourselves to fighting for the liberation of the sovereignty of the people from the stranglehold of the robbers in power. It is, essentially, a call for the empowering of what may be called the third force in Nigerian politics today — an alliance of intellectuals, academics, students, workers, and the marginalized masses. Today, in our country, power alternates between two bands of robbers — a military oligarchy which has constituted itself into a veritable instrument for state armed robbery and a corrupt business class created over the years by the military and comprising dynasties of men and women who have never given their nation one minute of honest labor but yet sit on billions of dollars acquired through preferments, false contracts, kick backs and other atrocities made possible by the military government’s decrees, edicts and ordinance “with immediate effect”, often with retroactive immediate effect. We have seen a situation in which over the years, our natural resources have not only been squandered in advance, “with immediate effect” but generations yet unborn have been condemned to bear a debt burden, contracted with immediate effect in order to pay for the foolishly lavish lifestyles and overseas investments of generations of robbers in power. It was in

circumstances of this kind that our guest tonight was forced into exile during the civil war of 1967-70, and here is he again in exile under similar circumstances.

Are we glad, then, to welcome Wole to New England?

Yes, but it seems to me that, as we welcome Wole into exile today, time is now opportune for the third force in Nigerian politics to be born. Yes, it is time for this third force (call it what you may) to assert itself vigorously under the leadership of men like Wole (and, of course, others like Chinua Achebe who has also been articulate in these issues). Yes, it is time for the third force to come out with a definite program of action to bring about an irreversible transformation of the situation in our much abused nation. I conclude by offering the following ten-point plan for the empowerment of what I have called The Third Force in Contemporary Nigerian Affairs:

1. The Third Force must initiate a concerted publicity drive to awaken international public opinion against the gross abuse to which the masses of our citizenry have been subjected by the military oligarchy and their corrupt business allies.
2. The Third Force must join forces with our African-American brethren and with other peoples of African descent across the world to bring pressure to bear upon the major powers to do everything in their power to assist us in forcing the military and their civilian allies to relinquish power immediately to the people.
3. The Third Force must take urgent measures to dramatize our concerns by instituting legal proceedings against all military and civilian leaders known to have deposited money and other loots in foreign banks in the countries in which these loots have been stashed away.
4. Inasmuch as the present leadership in our country has systematically destroyed our educational and healthcare system, driving the great majority of highly trained manpower in these fields into exile, The Third Force must undertake a worldwide campaign to ensure that education at all levels as well as special healthcare is denied them and members of their families everywhere in the world we can possibly reach.
5. The Third Force must establish a network of communications and community-development programs designed to reach the masses of Nigerians through their own folk media, with a view to helping them liberate themselves from the stranglehold of the charlatans who masquerade as their leaders.
6. The Third Force must launch a nationwide campaign, appealing to intellectuals, academics, students and other enlightened factors in the nation to withdraw every semblance of collaboration and support for the military and the corrupt business class of tricksters and robber-barons.

7. The Third Force must reject and help others to understand why they must reject in its entirety any new constitution or amendment of all existing constitutional provisions which do not reflect the wishes and aspirations of the people for a federal system which guarantees the rule of law and the free access to power of all citizens.

8. The Third Force must create a climate of opinion in which no amnesty of any kind whatsoever shall be granted to all those who have participated in one way or another in the economic crimes and genocidal war of attrition against our people over the past thirty years. Call it vendetta if you like, but every honest Nigerian must be made to look forward to the day when every single one of the robbers currently in power will be made to pay in full for treason and related felonies.

9. The Third Force must undertake a systematic campaign to ensure the effective disarmament of all armed forces which have never employed the huge arsenal under their control for the defence of the fatherland but for the perpetuation of themselves in power.

10. Finally, in all its proceedings, The Third Force must offer neither comfort nor recognition to anyone whatsoever who has held any office whatsoever or been shored up in any position of power whatsoever under the lawless conditions enacted during the military interregnum of the past thirty years.

Now that I have said these things, I feel a little bit relieved and can now freely say to our guest of honor how glad my wife and I are to welcome him to Boston and to New England.

Welcome.

Chukwuma Azuonye, Milton, MA

WHAT IS THE ALA?

The African Literature Association is an independent non-profit professional society open to scholars, teachers and writers from every country. It exists primarily to facilitate the attempts of a world-wide audience to appreciate the efforts of African writers and artists. The organization welcomes the participation of all who produce the object of our study and hopes for a constructive interaction between scholars and artists. The ALA as an organization affirms the primacy of the African peoples in shaping the future of African literature and actively supports the African peoples in their struggle for liberation.

The *ALA BULLETIN* (formerly the *ALA Newsletter*, volumes I-VII, 1974-1981), is published quarterly by the ALA for its members, and members receive substantial discounts when purchasing volumes of selected papers from the annual conferences of the ALA which take place in late March or April. Membership is for the calendar year. See the inside back cover of this *ALA Bulletin* for membership details.

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